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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0777
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000881

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/PI, DRL/NESCA
LONDON FOR LORD, PARIS FOR NOBLES

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/22/2019
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: RIAD TURK UPDATES ON DAMASCUS DECLARATION

REF: A. 08 DAMASCUS 00757

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 00477

[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 00788

[1](#)D. DAMASCUS 00826

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Leading Damascus Declaration opposition figure Riad al-Turk outlined the movement's current status in a wide-ranging December 14 discussion. Main points were:

-- Damascus Declaration General Secretariat members would like a face-to-face meeting with U.S. Embassy Charge d'Affaires, a request Post is willing to grant in a way that minimizes Damascus Declaration leaders' exposure to increased scrutiny by Syrian security services.

-- The 12 imprisoned members of the Damascus Declaration National Council have become eligible for early release, though it appears the security services are working to obstruct the requisite legal processes.

-- Hasan Abdul Azim's Arab Socialist Democratic Union (ASDU) party has submitted to the Damascus Declaration a list of demands that must be met in order for its (ASDU) continued membership in the movement. Primary among these demands is that greater representation be given to political parties signatory to the Declaration than to independents who do not have a declared party constituency behind them.

-- The SARG may be attempting to distract smaller Kurdish parties, like the Yeketi, from working with the Damascus Declaration. It is in the SARG's interest to paint Kurdish political activism as a species of "foreign separatism" as opposed to being part of a Syrian national political reform process.

-- Expatriate members of the Damascus Declaration have set up a temporary international general secretariat to coordinate the various external committees in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. The external committees abroad, however, have been crippled by internal, petty disputes.

-- Barada TV has attracted a wider audience in "politicized" Syrian circles. A lack of experience among contributors, a fear of SARG reprisals, sub-par guest

speakers, and an undersubscribed satellite service all limit Barada's potential impact. End Summary.

Damascus Declaration Seeks Meeting with CDA

¶2. (C) Members of General Secretariat of the Damascus Declaration, including Riad Turk, have asked to meet with the U.S. Embassy's Charge d'Affaires (CDA). The members understood the risk of such an undertaking, Turk stated, but felt the time had come for them to provide the CDA with a "broad political context for understanding the pro-democratic reform movement in Syria." Turk said the General Secretariat had not met with any other mission chiefs, though the French Ambassador had promised them a sit-down. Turk doubted the French Ambassador was truly serious, however. He characterized the promise as an attempt to "buy time," without elaborating on why. (Comment: Post is working on facilitating this request. End comment.)

Damascus Declaration Leadership in Prison

¶3. (C) Turk confirmed all 12 imprisoned members of the Damascus Declaration National Council (DDNC) (ref A) were now eligible for early release on good behavior. Eight of the 12 had reportedly written the necessary petitions to the court, but Turk had learned the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) had instructed the director of Adra prison not to forward any of the prisoners' petitions to the courts. The standard method for starting the early release process is for the prisoner to send a petition to the court bearing the signature of the prison director, who must testify to the prisoner's good behavior. Turk characterized GID's interference as signaling how high a stake the security services had in keeping Damascus Declaration leaders in jail. Turk said the prisoners' lawyers protested the GID's actions to the general prosecutor's office, but achieved nothing. Taking a different tack, the lawyers would submit petitions on the prisoners' behalf, he said, though he was unsure whether it would be any more successful.

¶4. (C) The hoped-for early release of the prisoners had frozen DDNC action the SARG might perceive as confrontational, Turk told us. The at-large Damascus Declaration National Council membership recently debated a proposal to convene the Council, which has been effectively dormant since the 2007 crackdown began. The vast majority, he said, viewed the political climate as being too hostile to such a meeting and that calling one could jeopardize any chance at early release for the imprisoned National Council members.

Political Fissures Within

¶5. (C) Turk described a memo from Hasan Abdel Azim, in his role as leader of the Arab Socialist Democratic Union party (ASDU), submitted to the Damascus Declaration outlining structural changes needed in order for Azim's party to reactivate its membership (ref C). (Note: The ASDU is one of six parties comprising the Democratic National Rally. The Rally, as a collective, was signatory to the Damascus Declaration. End note.) The main point of contention, Turk said, was that the ADSU wanted to shift the balance of representational power within the National Council to political parties signatory to the Declaration and away from "independents." The ASDU also called for an expansion of the Damascus Declaration's action agenda to include regional issues, like Lebanon and Israel. While there would be room for compromise on the issue, Turk told us, he doubted whether the DDNC would fully accede to the ASDU's demands. "For the first time in decades the bourgeoisie (due to politically independent representatives) is tempted to participate in a democratic reform movement," he observed. Azim's proposal

would effectively marginalize important "bourgeoisie" voices like that of currently imprisoned DDNC member Riad Seif, who was not a "politician."

¶6. (C) The General Secretariat readied a counterproposal, Turk said, offering, inter alia, the ASDU a guaranteed "quota" of representatives for membership in the DDNC as well as the General Secretariat. A guaranteed quota, Turk noted, would require a changes to the movement's internal political structure, since all representatives to the General Secretariat had to be elected. If the ASDU rejected the counterproposal, Turk said the Damascus Declaration would seek to keep the ASDU in its orbit by offering it a special "coordinating role," rather than see the ASDU drift toward "other rotten political parties" attached to the regime.

SARG's Kurdish Strategy

¶7. (C) Word that the SARG had opened a channel of communication to the Kurdish Yeketi Party had reached Turk, but he was reluctant to put too much stock in it. Turk reasoned it was unlikely the Yeketi, widely viewed as one of the more active and confrontational of the Kurdish parties in the Damascus Declaration, would be open to the regime's approaches. Nevertheless, Turk feared the SARG had set its sights on distracting smaller, left-leaning Kurdish parties from the Damascus Declaration. One reason the government hated the Damascus Declaration was because of cooperation between Kurds and Arabs, Turk explained. The regime wanted, he continued, for "Kurds to look like a foreign, separatist movement and not part of political reform in a Syrian national context." (Note: Rumors of SARG outreach to Kurds might be related to July talks between former MP Imad Baghdy and a host of Kurdish party leaders, including the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Yeketi reported in reftel D. End note.) Smaller Kurdish parties were "easier to play with," Turk noted, than the much larger parties.

The Damascus Declaration Abroad

¶8. (C) Turk related that "external committees" had set up an ad hoc, temporary "International Secretariat" to coordinate and provide leadership to the expatriate Damascus Declaration membership (ref B) in Europe and North America. The Damascus Declaration had succeeded in establishing external committees in Canada, Germany, France, and the United States, but in each country certain difficulties attended. In France and Canada, members from the People's Democratic Party were being "naughty," Turk half-joked, by demanding a greater number of representatives than other groups. The PDP was, he said, the most powerful Syrian political party in these countries. Nevertheless, the Damascus-based PDP had reigned in its counterparts, which had dissatisfied many expatriate PDP members. In France, one member had even resigned from the Damascus Declaration in protest.

¶9. (C) In the United States, Turk explained, a conflict had emerged when people associated with former Syrian Vice President Khaddam's National Salvation Front (NSF) falsely claimed Damascus Declaration affiliates, provoking squabbles and recriminations among other Damascus Declaration members, especially the "moderate Islamist" Movement for Justice and Democracy party. In Germany, the problem was disagreements with Kurdish parties, Turk said.

Barada TV

¶10. (C) Responding to a question on Barada TV, Turk joked, "I'm the last person to ask; I don't have a television." Many people strongly support Barada, he continued, "not only within the Damascus Declaration, but among other politicized circles as well. It has started to acquire an audience."

There remained serious challenges to the channel's viability, he added. The majority of satellite dishes in Syria were not tuned to Hotbird, which hosts Barada, posing a serious challenge to disseminating information broadly. Turk hoped in the future Barada might harness a more commonly used satellite service. Additionally, the "repetition of programs bored people." He had heard people complain that they were not getting "new information," and that while most people appeared to like the "anchors" on some programs, the prevailing view was that the "guests" were sub par.

¶11. (C) Conveying what was happening inside Syria was essential and there is little news on this, Turk told us. Though the Damascus Declaration had a "team" contributing to the channel, he admitted it was "weak." The team, he continued, lacked sufficient experience for this kind of work and had difficulties in finding people unafraid to appear on the channel. Turk also warned that "some people from the enemy" (security services) were vigorously pursuing investigations into the source of Barada's funding.

¶12. Comment: Our meeting with a sharp, ambitious, and irreverent Riad Turk provided a chance to discuss a host of domestic and regional issues and gave us one of our best windows into what is happening on the ground with the Damascus Declaration. As reported in reftels B & C, the Damascus Declaration's disputes with the ASDU continue. It is too early to speculate on the impact of a full ASDU split. Presently, Turk's ambition is to keep the movement alive and pass an intact, functioning political infrastructure to the council members upon their release, after which Turk let slip he hopes to "retire." Turk's assessment of Barada having increased its audience and established its relevance was encouraging news. Post shares his concern, though, over operational difficulties and the channel's difficulty in quickly reporting on events unfolding in the country. End Comment.
HUNTER